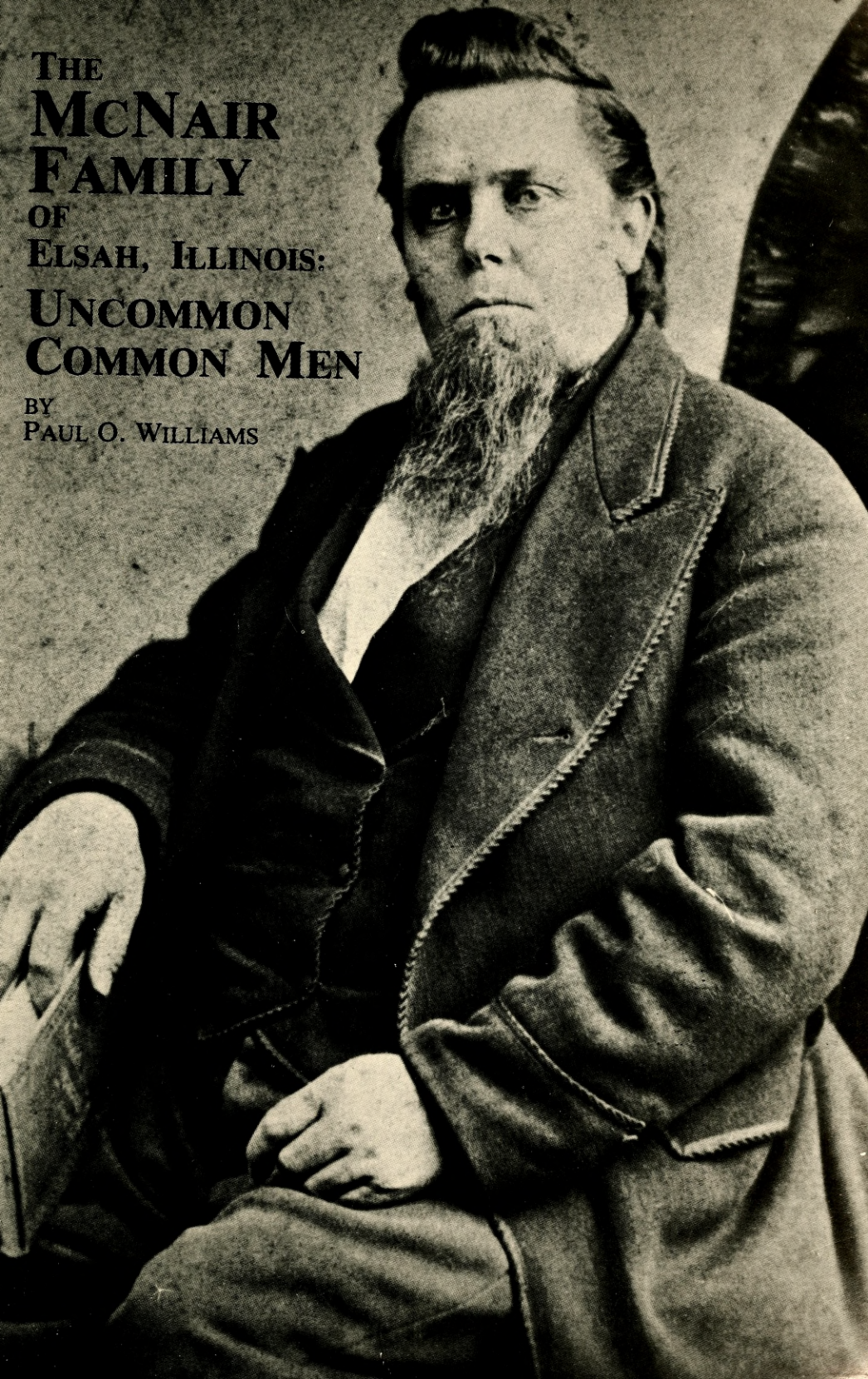
The McNair Family of Elsah, Illinois: Uncommon Common Men

By Paul O. Williams



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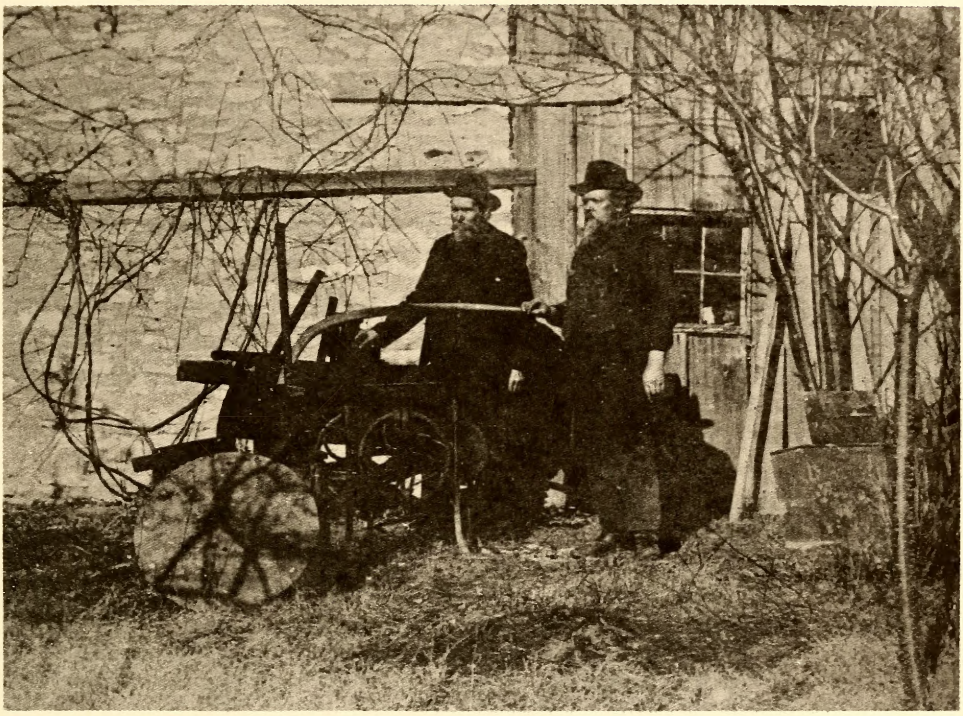

Robert and William McNair in their backyard with their planting machine. **Source:** Beulah Carpenter.

Historic Elsah Foundation Pamphlet Number Seven

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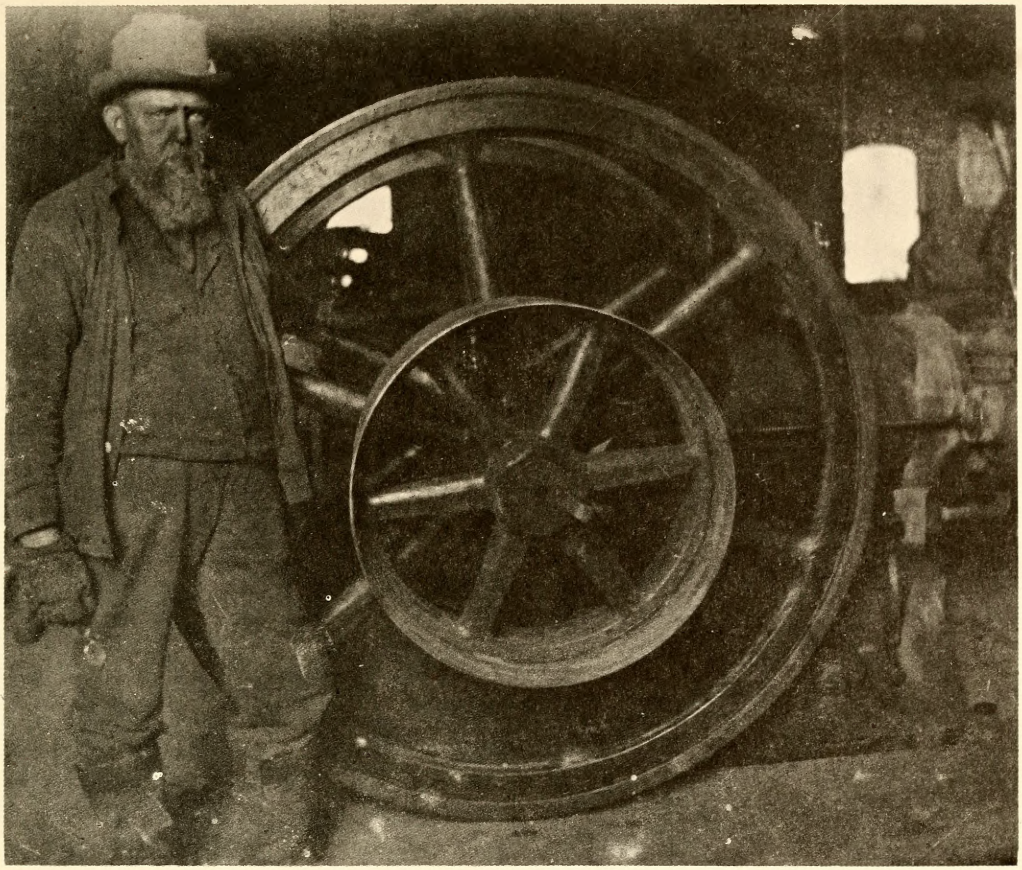
This pamphlet is dedicated to the old families of Elsah who have provided such historical continuity in the village: to the Cresswells, the Barnals, the Kellers, the McDows, the Barnses, the Lowders, the Cronins, the Darrs, and the Croxfords.

The author is grateful for the permission of Mrs. Beulah Carpenter to quote diary entries and letters written by the McNair family. He hopes those quotations not only do honor to the McNair family but sketch them in as vibrant and fascinating people of the kind Adlai Stevenson referred to when he remarked that the average man is much above average.

Thanks are also due to Principia College, for the use of the McNair materials housed in the college library, and for aid in myriad other forms. And in addition, aid to this project has come from a variety of other sources too numerous to mention.

Historic Elsah Foundation, P.O. Box 117, Elsah, Illinois 62028, publishes a quarterly newsletter and occasional leaflets and pamphlets.



William McNair at a steam engine. **Source:** McNair glass plates.

Tommy and Magnolia McNair, with daughter Beulah, ca. 1898. **Source:** Beulah McNair Carpenter.

Magnolia and Tommy McNair with their daughter, Beulah, at the family house on Mill Street, currently the Hosmer house, ca. 1900. The house was built before 1859, not long after the McNairs moved to Elsah. The roofline was soon to be changed to its present configuration because of leaking. **Source:** McNair glass plates.

The McNair Family of Elsah--Uncommon Common Men

Most working families of Elsah left very little record of their day-to-day lives. Perhaps research has determined that one built a wall here, another a house there, a third used to farm this or that field. But the fabric of their lives has ravelled out, and aside from a deed record, a news item, or a gravestone, the individual threads themselves have been lost.

One family, however; has left a sufficient record to become a window to the life of the common man for about thirty-seven years of Elsah's existence. This is the McNairs. There are really four reasons for this. First, William A. McNair kept a diary, and seven volumes of this are still available, the earliest material of which dates from the fall of 1875, the latest from 1898. Second, the family, even after they left Elsah for Peoria in 1912, and later for the west coast, retained ownership of their brick house on Mill Street, not selling it until 1952, when their neighbor Walter Cresswell, a local historian himself, in cleaning out the house for sale, found not only the diaries but a large packet of letters, and he knew to preserve them. Third, through fortuitous

circumstances, all of this material and a collection of glass negatives taken by Thomas McNair around the turn of the century, have come into the hands of the author. And last, the late Beulah McNair Carpenter, daughter of Thomas and Magnolia McNair, and granddaughter of William McNair, not only preserved materials, but shared them willingly with Charles Hosmer and the author from her home in Hemet, California.

It is all too typical an experience in Elsah that materials a hundred years old or so will be put on a bonfire by people who think they are of no value. The series of events that prevented this in the case of the McNair family has proven providential for this study.

Close to the center of the story is William Alexander McNair, a matter-of-fact, loyal, hard-working, inventive machinist and jack-of-all-trades. McNair was very much a man of his time, his social class, and his place. But he was also a little different--also in a very American way. He represents that quirky turn of ingeniousness, or enterprise, so common in the American small town of the nineteenth century. He is one of the many thousands of Americans who eventually, through inventions, sought a way out of the continual round of hard work for necessities and a very few amusements. He seems in his way to prove out Adlai Stevenson's contention that the average man is much above the average.

The McNairs came from Butler, Butler County, Pennsylvania, arriving in Elsah in 1856, just three years after General Semple opened the town. Patriarch of the family was Thomas McNair, who had been born in Newville, Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, on March 1, 1803. Leaving home at seventeen, the senior McNair settled in Tyler County, Virginia (later West Virginia), and became a millwright. There he met his wife, Elizabeth

Hanes, marrying on December 23, 1823. The couple later moved back into Pennsylvania. Though his mill in Butler burned in 1842, Thomas McNair rebuilt it, and from this experience went into business as a mill builder with his two brothers.

Not only did he build grist mills, but iron furnaces as well, and is credited with constructing a furnace at Lowell, Ohio, which was the first in the United States designed to use raw bituminous coal. After work on furnaces in Michigan, McNair joined the California gold rush in 1849, staying there four years and then returning to Virginia.

Mill building also brought him to Elsah in 1856 to construct the Knapp and Goodrich flour mill, which stood for almost ninety years on the riverfront in front of what later became the Elsah quarry. This large mill operated intermittently under a number of owners until it was turned into a rock crushing mill after the opening of the quarry in 1902.[1]

The Knapp and Goodrich mill was completed in 1857, and McNair was immediately employed in building a distillery just upriver from the flour mill, finishing this job in 1858. Almost surely his sons, William and Robert, helped in these two projects.

In spite of his history of moving around, with travels from coast to coast in a time of difficult travel, Thomas McNair and his family apparently remained in Elsah. He was fifty-five when the distillery was completed, and though he was to live until October 11, 1881, we have no record of his leaving Elsah for any long period.[2]

When the family arrived in Elsah, William McNair was eighteen. Assumedly he had helped in family projects all his life, and when he emerges to our view as a diarist in 1876, we see that his skills and

inclinations derive largely from those of his father. William, and his bachelor elder brother and lifelong companion, Robert, were skilled builders, machinists, repairers, millwrights, and tinkers whose talents were in constant local use.[3]

It must have been nearly at the time of their arrival that the McNairs constructed their brick house across from Elsah's Fountain Square Park, the house now the home of the Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., family. This structure, and the rock house next door, for many recent years the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ira McColl, now the home of Mrs. Dennie Minarick, belonged to the McNairs for many years.[4] Eventually William sold the brick house to Thomas, his son, who retained it until 1952, when it was sold to Mrs. Minna Johnson. The rock house, which at one period housed a machine shop in one end, became Robert's, though the family seems to have rented parts or all of both houses at various times, according to their needs.

It may be that the McNairs themselves built the brick house because it does not resemble any surviving Elsah house, and in its older version, its brick ends, which rose square above the ends of the eaves, resembles Pennsylvania houses of the nineteenth century.

A photograph, which because of railroad construction can be dated to 1881, shows a somewhat similar roof treatment on a house diagonally across the street, standing on the site of the present Annetta Cronin house. There the end walls of the house are stepped.

The family also used the hollow behind their house, down which flows a small branch of Askew Creek. They pastured cows in this valley, constructing a shed for them (now a foundation) well back from the village,

and apparently they gardened there as well. At the turn of this century this outlot belonged to Rosa Stroud, a first grade teacher in Kane, Illinois, and was rented by the McNairs for twelve dollars a year.[5]

Though the building of Elsah's first railroad, in the early 1880's, placed an embankment between the house and the hollow, the family still had access to the area through a stone culvert built by Hiram Keyser to conduct the stream under the right-of-way. But the earlier appearance of the area must have been much more open and scenic than it is today.

In the beginning pages of the first known diary, before the regular dated entries, appears William McNair's record of his family's work in building the Elsah Methodist Church on Selma Square. It is this record that tells us not only who built the church but a good deal about costs of materials, church officials, and individuals participating.

This church, which celebrated the centennial of the McNair-built edifice in 1974, had been established for some time in Elsah. The parsonage of the Grafton Circuit of the United Methodist Church had stood across Selma Square from the church site since 1859. The church was very active in the surrounding towns, and the Elsah area had enough Methodists to pay for their own structure.

William McNair took the lead in ordering lumber from Alton, paying haulers, buying hardware locally, billing the church, and recording the time that he, Robert, and his father spent on constructing the building. He charged the church five dollars for "Plan & Specification," but the design was almost certainly one he acquired ready-made.[6] It is a simple frame building, on a stone foundation, with a modest but interesting steeple. It represents none of the Victorian flair so common in wood

construction of the decade, but it was sturdy, practical, and inexpensive. The McNairs began work early in September and finished the church in late November, with a few jobs carrying over to the next month. Today this church is the only structure in Elsah for which documentation exists indicating that the McNairs built it. It is a much admired, much photographed building, charming in its simplicity, and a true product of the practicality that pervaded the modest country towns of the Midwest.

The diary that has survived begins on the first of January 1875. Despite the fact that it is so informative, it is also a mysterious document. William McNair records almost every miniscule expenditure, every small bit of cash earned, and fragments of other information about family health, weather, temperature, and enterprises. He also leaves out a great deal. But the usefulness of the diary lies chiefly in the information it gives about the ebb and flow of daily life in Elsah, about habits of mind, social method, earning a living, and entertaining oneself in a Mississippi River village in Illinois.

McNair was writing to himself. One suspects that the diary began as an economic record, because the fabric of informal debt and credit was very complex in Elsah at the time. Goods and services were often paid for by other goods or services. If Fred Winger hauled a load of wood for the McNairs, William might make him a couple of baseball bats on his lathe in exchange. One always owed something to the other, and specific jobs had agreed-upon money values, but money seldom changed hands.

The McNairs frequently had to wait until harvest for payment for

building work done on farms. Meanwhile, part payment might come in sweet potatoes or corn.

Purchases at local stores were generally not paid for at the time. A record, even McNair's fragmentary notations, kept things straight. He might write, as on February 6, 1875, "Lib got a box of Blacking and 10cts worth of Muslin Velvet 65cts Paid Stephany Butter 50cts."[7] Or, as on February 12, "got a sack of flour from Stephany $1.50[ct] paid for it Set a Saw for James Piggott got 10cts for it." Or, as was more usual, as on the 13th, "Got $1.00[cts] Worth of Sugar from B & Onettos did not pay for it."[8]

However, the record is not solely economic. Family activities, arguments, local events, entertainments, and enterprises all get put together in a curious running record, without punctuation, and with sporadic capitalization. For example, on January 8, 1875, McNair recorded the following:

> was over at Fathers untill Noon Nearly Dr Sconce was there he said my Dr Bill was two Dollars we all had an argument on Progression religious and Machanical attempted to turn a pulley and Bursted it Made another out of Mulberry turned it and fixed a place for the Belts to run through Commences Snowing about three Oclock commenced Blowing and has the apearance of Being a Severe Storm.

Though grammatically rough, devoid of punctuation, and full of unexplained information, this passage is not only in a rich and useful prose. It also describes the vibrant and various nature of Elsah life at the time.

In the long run, the diaries explain and inform as often as they mystify. On Sunday, January 10, 1875, for example, McNair notes, "Done Nothing to day Lib went out to See the cows they Were getting along fine Lecture Delivered." It was quite typical of William McNair to rest on Sunday after the sixty hour work week he regarded as standard. We learn also that the cows often fended for themselves unless in milk. From many entries like that on the lecture, we see the place religion held in McNair's life, even though at this period his interest in it was undefined. Sunday afternoon or evening, as the diary indicates, was a usual time for church activities.

As McNair became older, his interest in keeping diary records seemed to increase. At least the entries in later volumes are longer and more informative. They still focus on facts and on the work day, but reactions and explanations grow. As William and Robert McNair became more and more caught up in various inventions, worked on often futilely, always with little or no money, the diaries reflect these preoccupations.

A collection of letters, largely written back to Elsah after William and Robert had moved to Peoria after the turn of the century, shows also that the diaries do not reflect all of William's personality. His warmth, family concern, and sense of humor appear there in abundance, as does occasional near despair at his financial straits. The letters show clearly that the diaries reflect only one aspect of the man.

The diaries are also unusual in being completely unconscious. Quite plainly McNair never dreamed that they would be scrutinized by any future generation interested in his lifestyle. Like the secret

diaries of William Byrd they record daily preoccupations wholly without pretense.

Reports of the family from the pre-diary period in Elsah are practically non-existent. When the diary opens, in January 1875, we find the McNair brothers, and their father, living the life of typical rural mechanics. Work is often scarce. Jobs are limited. Substantial enterprises are continually interrupted by the press of small tasks, done either for immediate money or for family needs. At the time, the elder McNairs still live in Elsah. Robert, a lifelong bachelor, is very much a part of the family. William is married to Elizabeth Ward or Lib, as he calls her. They have two small sons, Eugene, whose birthdate has been lost, and Tommy, born in 1869.

In January, 1875, McNair is planning a "2 run mill," in terms of costs, which he sees as "complete at $8,000." He didn't have any of that capital. He is also shelling corn "for Horning," sharpening saws, fixing the spring on his revolver and loading his own shells, turning baseball bats and clothespins on his lathe, fixing the scales (and weighing the family), making hominy, getting copper and iron out of the ruin of the distillery (which burned in 1870), trying to fix Will Rhoads's melodeon (and failing), turning ten pins for his children, cutting out a black walnut hack block, making "two rugg Nittingnedles," setting his hens on clutches of eggs, caring for his cows (which are calving), serving on a jury in "a dog case," churning butter, and attending to the other endless details that make up country life. It is a mode of life in which work and play mingle. Economic gain is often directly taken from the land or the river, without the intermediary of a supplier.

Life is close to the bone, and capital is scarce.

It must have been frustrating to McNair, in such circumstances, to want to open his own mill. It was not until the next decade that he would do it, and even that work was interrupted by daily necessities. When there was no grain to grind, or no logs to saw into lumber, he could keep some cash coming in by sharpening saws at a quarter each, mending downspouts, putting up shutters, or like work.

Occasionally he got larger jobs. Early in the diary, on April 15, 1875, he began work for Isaac Newton Piggott, Jr., on constructing a building. This kept him busy until May 15. The diary entry for this date reads as follows:

> Very Warm Father and I made 1/2 days work for I. N. Piggott which Makes my time amount to $73.62 1/2 cts and Fathers to $61.87 1/2 cts Which Concludes our Work for I N Piggott got a letter from Phil evry thing is right for a start on 1st of July got 10cts worth of Starch at B & Onettos did not Pay Piggott Brought my tools home to night and Jep terry says he Wants me certain on thursday.

This entry is revealing. Having finished work for Piggott, McNair was to start in two days on a building job on the Terry farm, which lay on what is now Route 100 north of Elsah. He was to get $2.50 a day. He also had made arrangements with his brother-in-law, Phil Ward, for a job in Quincy, Illinois, to start in July. Plainly, he was putting his idea of a mill on the shelf for the time being.

His work for Terry lasted only until May 1. Between this time and

that of his departure for Quincy, McNair made a pair of water tanks for Harvey Edsall and did part of a building job for Addison Greene, whose farm lay in Dow.[10] But on July 2, he noted,

> Made a little over a quarter of a days Work When I Steped on a Joice and it turned over and I fell into the Basement and hurt myself considerable got 50Cts worth of Sugar from B & Onettos did not Pay for it got $8.00 Cts from Green for Work ~~Saturday~~ had a Very heavy rain this morning the Branch Was higher than it has Been Since 1858.

This ended his work for Greene. There was no compensation for his accident. The following day he noted, "feel Very Sore Done nothing all day." Two days later he wrote, "Lib washed I done nothing." He was soon up and about, but recorded only light tasks. Laconically he noted, on the 12th, "Paid 50 cts for a Bottle of Pain Cure." No more work of note was recorded until he left for Quincy on July 27.

Once there, he made arrangements for work and housing, returned to Elsah, packed, paid his bills, and left for Quincy on the steamboat Harry Johnson on August 1.

During his first day there, after getting somewhat settled, the family went "to Barnums humbug . . . Paid 75cts for admission and was glad to get home again."

McNair worked at "the Planter works" for twenty cents an hour. His regular workday was ten hours, his work week six days. Though he doesn't mention much of what he was doing, he did spend several days piling lumber, and on August 13 sawed 115 tongues, assumedly for corn

planters. Phil Ward, who worked at the same plant, was champhoring, probably trimming up the wood pieces that McNair and others sawed up.

The McNairs' life in Quincy differed considerably from that in Elsah. Not only was he a comparative stranger. He was a regular wage earner. He had no cows, chickens, or other details to fragment his workday with.

During the Quincy period, McNair was earning and spending. Apparently Phil boarded with the McNairs, paying $4 a month. A check of costs for September 1875, as the diary records them, shows McNair working a full sixty hours almost each week, and collecting nearly $48 a month, or $.20 per hour. During that period he paid out $21.60 for food, and $10 for rent. Coffee cost about fifty cents a week, and butter came to $2.10 for the month (or more than a day's work). Meat for the month came to $3.65. The McNairs' diet was substantial but not greatly varied. Beans, potatoes, meat, sugar, butter, tea, coffee, pumpkins, cabbage, milk, eggs, crackers, fish, flour, yeast, lard, molasses, salt, and brown crackers appear in the record. On September 23rd, the family went to the fair, paying $1.25 to get in, and buying the usual peanuts, popcorn, and candy. Although some things seem cheaper, in terms of purchasing power, a working man today, making $4 an hour, seems to have about six times the income that the McNairs had in Quincy.

It may well be that William intended remaining in Quincy. It is clear from the diary that he was gaining no capital, but that his sixty-hour work week was completely consumed in current expenses. Yet he was happy enough with his lot to convince Robert to come join him, at least temporarily.

Robert arrived on November 23, 1875. William took a day off to show him around, to buy a cord of wood (which cost him more than two days' wages), and to get a shave and haircut. Though Robert stayed only a short time, he was back January 4th on the steamboat Mitchell, going to work the next night as a watchman. Robert's living with the family apparently helped expenses, William noting occasionally payments Robert was making him.

McNair's regular employment ended on March 22nd. He noted in his diary, "I made a days work Which lets me off Cleaned out and staid untill dark." The next day saw him trying to find work at "the Plow Manufactory," the Union Mills, and elsewhere. But he had no luck. Robert and Phil left for home on the 31st, leaving William's family behind. After futile attempts to find work, he began on April 11th to weatherboard the house of a friend named Frank. This, though, was a small job. By the 23rd he notes, "talking about going to Jersey." But the next day, "the niger Preacher wants me to Build an Edition to his house commence next week at $2.00." This job, for a man named Louis Jenkins, began on May 2nd and was interspersed with work at the "Vandiver works" beginning that week. They made corn planters, and may have been the origin of the corn planting inventions that William and Robert worked on so assiduously during the early 1880's in Elsah. Soon Phil Ward returned and helped at Mr. Jenkins' house.

On Tuesday, July 4, 1876, the centennial of the Declaration of Independence, William took the day off. His diary entry reads as follows: "we all went down town after the rain which lasted untill 9 oclock then it rained after night again ice cream 60 Eugenes suit 2 75

fire crackers and torpedoes 55 lemonade 20^{cts} car fare 10."

Soon William got his wife's picture taken, on the 8th, and sent her and the boys off on the Andy Johnston, probably to Elsah. He noted that night, "it is terrible Lonesome as Phil is not here and I am By myself."

He also finished work for Louis Jenkins, returning to daily work at an undisclosed shop. Life at Quincy had settled down to a routine. His family returned in late July. Work became steady. Occasional outings to catch fish or gather hickory nuts enlivened the passage of the weeks, but only one other aspect of life brightens the diaries: the entertainment available to the family in an established city. Lectures at the opera house by theologians and politicians, Professor Wilson diving off the bridge, and Robert McWade performing Rip Van Winkle at the theater all gave life a novelty scarcely available at Elsah.

The Quincy diary essentially ends on November 26, 1876, though notations appear in the back from 1877 written in Elsah. It is the dullest of the diaries. Perhaps this is why the family returned to Elsah in the beginning of April 1877.[11] Perhaps not. William's wife, Lib, had been ailing off and on, dying the next year on August 14th, leaving her husband to raise the children alone, in Elsah, with the surrounding presence of Robert and the elder McNairs. Thomas McNair died also in the time between available diaries, October 11, 1881. His wife thereafter lived sometimes in Elsah, sometimes with other relatives.

What happened at that time, though, is unrecorded. Perhaps some hint of what was going on appears in the Jersey County Democrat of March 25, 1880, where the anonymous Elsah columnist, who signed himself "Orphan Boy," wrote, "McNair Bros. are still improving their corn marker. This invention, if it comes up to the expectations of the inventors, will meet the wants of all the farming community in respect to a corn marker."

This was an overstatement. The McNairs continued to work on their corn marker, or "check rower," as the diaries call it, for years, designing, redesigning, trying, failing, starting, gaining capital, losing it, with incredible indefatigability, adding to the check rower a corn planter. The idea of the original invention, apparently, was to improve the farmers' knowledge of where he had already planted in the field he was planting mechanically and to make the planting more even. It was to attach to any corn planter--but what the McNairs found was that it didn't attach easily to many models. Special couplings had to be devised. This didn't seem commercially feasible, so they designed a planter to go with the check rower. But this story is perhaps best told by means of the diary below.

Volume 3 covers the year 1882. It opens with the new railroad being furiously built behind the house. The Wabash had agreed with those taking out stock on the new line to bring a train into Elsah by January 1, 1882. They really didn't make it, as McNair notes, writing, "they have got onto the Lower trestle By dark the Whistle scared the dog and Chickens terrible Bad." But building was to go on for some time.[12]

It is immediately clear that a man of different writing attitudes is writing the diary of 1882. He is much more willing to comment on passing affairs. His daily entries are longer, include more family affairs, and are full of the concerns of his budding fascination with practical inventions. They are still curiously impersonal and laconic. The entry of January 3rd is typical: "Clear and pleasent got a letter from Robt and one from S Gilbert the School Teacher Walker whiped Eugene outrageously I Guess Henry Howard will take the upper room of my house and Chas Parker."

McNair still divides his time between small, practical jobs, bringing in a small flow of cash, and his now consuming interest in invention. We find him on January 6th building a coffin "for a man By the name of John King." The county will pay him $4 for it. He is still filing and setting saws, mending coffee pots, patching Eugene's pants, digging graves, fixing shears, designing duck decoys for Eugene (who now hunts regularly) and making a new shell extractor for his gun, catching a sheep in the river "that got away from the Boat hands" and collecting a dollar for it after towing it to shore.

He has hired a woman, Nettie Claridge, to keep house off and on for the family. She was one of a series who did housework for the McNairs through the years. Apparently he has moved into the smaller rock house and rented the brick house out. [13] The boys are getting old enough to fend for themselves, and Eugene brings in game and fish to add to the larder.

But the consuming interest in the diary is the check rower. Design

changes, trials, financial deals, all cryptically discussed, fill the text. The McNairs have gotten J. E. Starr, who owned an extensive and prosperous farm east of Eminence Hollow, on land now the Eliestoun section of the Principia College campus, to back them, supplying weekly wages for the brothers. Zera Calkins, a longtime Elsah resident and friend, supplied laboring help. Starr was a well respected man who had been president of the Illinois Horticultural Society and was desired as a speaker as far away as Chicago. In the long run, he seems not to have backed a winning proposition in supporting the McNairs. But eventually some money came in from the venture anyhow.

Starr put the brothers in contact with capitalists in St. Louis and Madison, Wisconsin. Working out a contract satisfactory to all parties seemed to be an impossible task, so many revisions were required. But much effort was put into the venture by all. On February 2nd, McNair notes, "Mr Thom and Wilson of St. Louis came up to day and was perfectly satisfied with the machine and proposed to take hold of it and get a shop or have us manufacture here us making 500 machines." This sounded simpler than it turned out to be. The McNairs did not have real experience in organizing a mass production system. The machine was not perfected yet. Parts needed redesigning, and, as they repeatedly found, a machine that would theoretically work was a different thing from one that would stand up to the hard usage of a farm operation. For example, the entry for February 15th records hitching Fred Winger's team to it: " run all right untill it run into a carr when it caught on the arms and Cut the Pin off that runs through the hub on the slide Arm."

The next day he wrote,

> took our Planter out to Keslers field and made a couple of trips across the field But found out that it would make a double throw and the Pin in journal was too loose took it out drilled a new hole and Put in a larger Pin it Stoped raining about 12 oclock our men Toms and two of the Wilsons Came up on the Boat we went out to the field with them and had the test which was satisfactory and the Concluded to go ahead so Robt got ready and went down to St Louis after machinery.

As a result the McNairs set up a shop in the lower floor of the Odd Fellows' Hall, which stood on the riverfront where the present Elsah turnoff from the McAdams Highway lies.[14] This job and acquiring materials, took much time. Disputes with Robert seem to indicate that the brothers felt considerable pressure at this time. If one can trust hints in the diary, William felt he was the superior mechanic and inventor. Robert sometimes resented this, though the record seems to support William. An informal division of labor partly developed, with William doing more of the shop work and Robert the business dealings. This took Robert on trips, since he, without children, was more free to go.

March saw a trip to St. Louis, to the Black Diamond Steel Works, to arrange legal and financial matters. It is perhaps typical that it began with William rowing to Alton (in Lou Calkins' skiff) to get there. They arrived home late on the Gun City, picking up the skiff in Alton on the way.

Spring seemed good. Activity was brisk in the riverfront shop, with a St. Louis pattern maker and a machinist arriving on March 28th to help with design details.

But these matters seemed endless, and improvements seemed inconclusive. William's tooth kept paining him, though dosed with Wizard Oil, and his elder sister, Martha Brock, called"Matt"in the diaries, was obviously nearing her death of tuberculosis. Eugene kept her supplied with snipe and plover, but there was little else that could be done. Comments on her health are curiously interspersed with machine design details:

> I fixed up the Punch But done no Punching Because Robt had made a Bad Place on the die Matt was worse and I got Jim Moss to go out after Tube[15] Mr. Ball came up on the Spread Eagle I explained all the Parts of the machine to him and he went Back on her he gave me a Photograph of it the wheel pattern Came up and found Matt better.

Matt died on April 12th, 1882, and for once, McNair put no details of the corn planter in his diary. And yet the entry concludes,"I got 25cts worth of Bread." Life went on. Martha Brock was buried on April 14th, with the McNairs and Brocks walking behind the coffin as it was taken from the service at the Methodist church to the gravesite in Elsah cemetery.[16] Before day's end the brothers were back at work on the corn planter.

As invention continued, so did William's toothache. Finally, on

April 23rd, he went to Dr. Benjamin Farley, who lived at Mill and Maple Streets, and as the diary describes it, "had him attempt to Pull it But failed and Broke it of three and loosed the teeth on either side of it so that it Pained me Very Mutch But he did not charge me for it."

A trial of the check rower, using Perry Spangle's planter, on May 1st, resulted in more malfunctions. Activity increased, with William working even on a Sunday, against his usual practice (though he did take time to fish in the evening). He even hired Henry Howard to work out his road tax for $3.00.

By May 19th, William was planning a reaper, though the planter had not been perfected. On the 22nd, they discovered they could not attach their check rower to Nel Lurton's corn planter without special rigging. And by the 24th, J. E. Starr arrived from St. Louis with the first discouraging news from their St. Louis backers. He "Reported no more expenses untill the machine is a Success." McNair added, "it workes Splendid So far."

Almost immediately, work slackened off at the shop. William caught a boatload of wood and rails on the spring rise. He got a pig from Bill Tonkinson, his mother paying for it. Work on the machine continued slowly. A trial on June 1st at Starrs resulted in further failure. "it would not work untill we cut off the trigger Pins and then oil the Slide frame then we Broke off an arm of the Bearing Casting By a Bolt and Catching on Pully." Once this was fixed, it seemed to work. On the same day enough steel came from Pittsburgh on

the river for 100 machines.

Further complications developed as the river rose slowly into the store room of the Odd Fellows' Hall; then the Knights of Pythias, organizing a lodge in the hall, asked them to stay out of their shop awhile because of the noise. Delays and distractions continued, along with some progress. It didn't take much, though, to throw the project off the track, because lack of funds caused the McNairs to do what they had to to keep the family going. A trip to the cemetery to fix his wife's grave, for example, resulted in several days' work getting the hay out from among the graves for their own use. Some of it was spoiled by rain and further expense was caused by their hiring Louis Keller's team and wagon to do the hauling.

But this slow, countrified approach to the project didn't sit well in St. Louis. On July 26th, Starr got a letter from Toms and Wilson "stating he had no more money to Put in our work or any other he don't think us capable of making a machine." McNair made no comment, and continued to work, but interspersed his remarks on his invention with interested reports on Eugene's catch on the trot line, with jugging trips, [18] tomato canning, churning butter, cutting into a bee tree, making apple butter, working for Enos Doron, then owner of the flour mill, and other distractions.

The brothers were really broke. When another letter from St. Louis asked Robert to visit the city on patent matters, they wrote back that they were financially unable to make the trip.

Summer concluded as it had begun, with more work on the machines, interspersed with making a derrick for Jerome O'Connor, canning

peach butter, fixing Louis Starr's gun, making a blackboard for Arthur Rummerfield, fixing a cider vat, and gathering hickory nuts and pecans.

Meanwhile, correspondence from St. Louis concerning patents continued. Finally, October 5th, J. E. Starr gave the brothers expenses to conclude the matter in the city, but when they arrived, they found the city shut down and at a fair. Naturally, they went too, met the lawyers there, and arranged an interview. This meeting was helpful, but ultimately inconclusive.

By November the brothers were slowly turning out machines, even though the design was not yet perfected. They had concluded it needed more bracing, which they supplied. M. H. Ball, of St. Louis, sent them an order for nine machines late in the month, and they continued work. It was clear that they never tired of improving the machine, and in fact they seemed more interested in this than in manufacturing machines on a mass basis. The Ball Brothers, who had money in the McNairs' supplies, sensed this apparently, and asked for a complete machine so that they could see to the manufacturing.

Fall became December. William refilled a feather bed, cut more wood, and sharpened the boys' skates. Work continued even on Christmas Day, but at least they had a turkey dinner with the family, and the brothers got their usual silk handkerchiefs as presents. Tommy got one, too, in addition to "Cotton and Pencil Pen holder some candy." Eugene got a collar button.

The end of the year saw patterns for the machine ready to go to St. Louis with Robert. It also saw William killing the family hog and salting down the meat.

decide in mid June to quit the corn planter effort. The McNairs doggedly persisted, but summer brought haying in the cemetery, much fishing, building a new skiff for Eugene, coffin making, knitting a seine, much repair work on farm machinery, and building jobs around the town. Mrs. McNair, senior, was away, so William added bread baking to his chores.

Enos Doron was becoming more interested in the venture and offered to buy out Toms and Wilson giving the brothers $500 in September. At this time they had decided to build their own shop and vacate the Odd Fellows' premises. They asked Mrs. Ames for the price on four lots. It turned out to be $400. This, at the time, proved to be too much.

For the time being, they established a small shop in their rock house, and in March 1884 they bought a house and lot from "Ner Hartley,"[19] setting up a saw mill in it and moving their corn planter materials there. Immediately they negotiated with Mrs. Ames for an adjacent lot, eventually concluding the purchase on May 24th for $200, for which Mrs. Ames accepted a note "Payable on Apr 27th 1889." Evidently Mrs. Ames had no big expectations of their immediate financial success.

What really happened in the winter of 1883-1884 is that for the time being the corn planter venture ground to a halt. The diaries tell of much ferrying of people and barrels, fixing of fiddles, magic lantern shows, snowballing, churning, selling of the cow, Bloss, clerking at the elections, gardening, making honey frames, cutting lumber, fixing Mrs. Ames' lawnmower, and other innumerable odd jobs. The main thrust

of their activities seems to have been setting up their sawmill and fixing farm machinery. From time to time they did desultory work on the cornplanter. The reason for delays was probably financial.

There is a gap in the existing diaries between volume 3, ending June 4, 1884 and volume 4 beginning on October 18th. This volume extended to May 22, 1888. When this account opens, the brothers are building their big shop, which stood on the northeast corner of Mill and Maple Streets, a lot now empty. This two-story shop was to be a combination saw and grist mill. The work went fast, with much help from Tommy, Eugene, and Willis Brock, who was now boarding with them. The windows were glazed on November 27th, after the first snow. Odd jobs continued all the while, of course. It snowed again December 11th, before the engine room was closed in, so they had to shovel snow and close the room the next day.

Mill burrs were bought on mortgage December 15th at $200. Dressing and seating them took longer. In fact the brothers were at it all Christmas Day. Willis Brock, McNair notes, "got a present from his girl of a gold pen." No other presents are mentioned. The entry concludes, "Robt and I had a Spat."

By January 7, 1885, they were able to get up steam to test the burrs "to see Whether they were in ballance." Two days later, the first grist, forty bushels of corn sent down by Mrs. Ames, came to be ground. On the 10th, McNair notes, "we commenced grinding for the first ground 84 bushels corn in 5 1/4 hours for Mrs Ames." So the

brothers were in business anew. This was a type of work they knew well from childhood. The problem, of course, was in getting people to bring their business to Elsah. This was not as great as it may seem, since, with transportation slow, farmers dealt with the nearest town, but surely the McNairs could not have hoped for a booming business.

Work on an elevator followed, and further work on sifters. By late January 1885, the mill was working well, and corn and grain were going through it regularly. McNair notes on February 8th, "we had Buckwheat Cakes for Breakfast for the first of our grinding." Work on the steam engine was continual. But grinding jobs came in regularly during February. Of course, other jobs were done as well.

In March Robert got interested in moving an ice house for Mrs. Ames, and began this work by the end of the month. April saw steady mill work, as well as extensive work on house moving for Mrs. Ames. The Ames job was not completed until the end of June. It had involved most of the family at different times, though it was mostly Robert's project. Rollers and dollies were scoured up from St. Louis, Piasa Island,[20] and Otterville. Millwork and some sawing jobs, chiefly of trellis and window trim, were handled by Willliam and Tommy. Eugene, as usual, was out on the river with gun, hook, and net, or ferrying people to Portage and Alton.

The diary for the summer, specifically for July 15th through September 27th, 1885, is lost or was not kept.[21] After a single entry, for the 28th, it skips up to October 21st. When it resumes, the

brothers are making school seats and building a house for Langford Vanderslice. They are nearly finished, with one of the Keysers doing the plastering, probably Hiram.

The entry of October 28th includes a significant passage: "we both went to the Preachers to sing [22] and they formed a Chautauqua Society." This society, located in Babb's Hollow, later Chautauqua, Illinois, a mile and a half upriver from Elsah, still operates, though as a summer community.[23]

The grist and saw mills are still in operation, but the brothers are still doing odd jobs of all sorts for themselves and others. Eugene is still fleshing out the family larder with game. On December 13th, just after a six inch snow, Eugene killed nine quail with one shot. The family had them for dinner. Christmas was just another day. Robert went to Jerseyville for lumber and coal. William "had the neuralga very bad done nothing but stay around the shop."

The end of January 1886 saw two interesting events. The brothers got the corn planter out to begin redesigning it, for a short time, and William joined the church he had built eleven years earlier. On February 7th, he notes: "went to Preaching at night but the Sermon was not quite half through when the word came the J K Francis house was afire it Burnt down Church dis."

In March, Robert was elected town clerk, and in April William was elected a director of the school. Inasmuch as Robert had previously failed to make the primary, this seems to have represented an upswing in the brothers' fortunes, perhaps because they were now very visible

businessmen operating their mill on a fairly steady basis.

Spring turned into summer with the same pattern of life. Robert worked at Ames' while William continued work on the corn planter in odd moments. Someone stole Eugene's skiff to cross the river with, but they got it back. Eugene began spending evenings out in the country, being now of courting age.

- July saw work beginning on the Chautauqua grounds. Tents were put up on August 9th. The first service came on the 10th. Robert went regularly to the camp meeting the next week, leaving William at the shop. On Sunday, the 15th, all the family went "except mother." They all went again, including mother, on the last day of the services, Sunday the 22nd, using their skiff.

Late August and early September saw them acquiring another sawmill, from M. M. Giberson, in return for one-tenth of the lumber they would cut with it. Much wood was cut with it during the fall. On September 23rd William's sister Maria arrived for a visit on the Steamer Mattie Bell. She was really visiting their mother, who lived with her for extended periods of time. Maria wrote frequently to her family, often sending money, especially during the difficult period when the brothers were bending all their efforts on the corn planter. She stayed until November 3rd, leaving with Harry Brock for Pennsylvania, where some of the family still lived.

McNair skipped his diary for the last half of November, noting on December 1st, "I did not Journalize since last date on account of a getting my thumbnail Sawed off." The mill business had its dangers, and

the diary includes reports of hammer-mashed thumbs, burnt palms, and strained backs. The brothers' health was none too good, largely because of the chills and fever so common to the river bottom country in the nineteenth century. William also had frequent trouble with his teeth.[24] His solutions were either Wizard Oil or extraction.

Winter brought more sawmill work, cutting up pine, sycamore, cherry, oak, and walnut. With spring a log raft of 510 logs came by, and Eugene helped raft it down to Piasa Creek. A protracted religious meeting was held on March 12th in Newbern. Eugene went, and the next day "Professed religion and joined the Church."

In April 1887 William was elected village clerk. He also began work at this time on a new invention, at first referred to in the diary as a "counter." It was a mechanical adding machine, an involvement which was to replace the corn planter as a driving obsession with the brothers. On April 22nd Robert got interested and joined his brother in the second of their protracted fascinations. This too was to be partly a failure, partly a success. It was awhile getting underway, however. Spring and summer 1887 went according to the pattern of the time.

The diary has another gap between August 18th, 1887, on the day before the Chautauqua Association managed to buy most of Babb's Hollow, to March 12th, 1888, eight days before Robert and William had to testify before the Grand Jury in Jerseyville in the Xavier Schneider attempted murder case. This was probably the most notorious event in Elsah's history to that time, but it is typical of McNair to say almost

nothing about it. His entry for March 29th is as follows:

> Thursday 29 went up to Jerseyville Robt Willis and myself and testyfied in the Harry minor Case Paid 25cts for dinner I Staid untill the night train Robt and Willis Staid all night was Supenied on the defense.[25]

April 9th saw the engine, which needed continual repair and attention, so damaged that the brothers "Concluded to try and get another Engine and Boiler." But finding one that would suit at a good price was not easy.

The brothers obviously got their engine, but the diary does not record the fact. There is a break before the next known volume, which begins October 3, 1891 and carries forward until March 31, 1893. A volume following immediately is also available, carrying the record straight through until the last of December 1894.

In the hiatus between diaries an important event has occurred in Elsah: the shoo-fly line has closed, and the bluff line has opened, giving Elsah a much more direct rail link to Alton. This was important to the McNairs, because now the coal they so laboriously brought to fire their steam engines is much more readily obtainable,[26] and they have now become coal suppliers to the village. Tommy now 22 has bought a team, and both a wagon and a buggy. During the early nineties he not only hauled coal and a variety of other goods, but conveyed people to the Hanes Station at Beltrees to catch the train there, where the railroad went to Alton or Jerseyville.

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Both of the McNair boys were beginning to strike out on their own. During 1892 both were courting and building their own houses. Eugene worked in Alton a fair amount of the time. He also has developed his outdoor interests by buying a trammel net and fishing professionally. In February 1892, Eugene caught a 98 lb. and a 32 lb. catfish. Tommy worked on a variety of jobs not related to the family. Both had girlfriends, and Tommy spent a good deal of time with the Milfords, who lived in the present Mack house on Palm Street, and whose daughter Magnolia, or Nolia as she is commonly called, was to become his wife.

Apparently Tommy's late courting did not always sit well with he family. On January 6, 1892, McNair wrote: "We locked Tommy out last night he tryed the hay mow but left and went to Zeras." It was 2 degrees above that night.

This period also saw progress on the "machine," that is, the adding machine. Again both brothers were working on it, each trying his own ideas, each somewhat watchful of the other and possessive of his own ideas. Occasionally they "had a spat." Almost always the exigencies of invention caused the brothers to fall out. In late November 1891, they worked side by side without speaking for a day and a half as the result of an argument. The persistent problem with the machine was in getting it to carry numbers. They were years solving this, as well as the "naught device" and the ribbon system.

Having a mill provided the McNairs an ideal set-up. They had work, and a fairly steady income, but still had free time and machinery

with which to develop their invention. This system seemed to marry country slowness, and lack of capital, with steady progress on the problems offered by the adding machine.

Other changes were evident. In 1888 J. E. Starr had sold his fruit farm to Henry S. Turner, a wealthy St. Louis real-estate dealer who had married Ida Ames, Mrs. Lucy Ames's daughter. Their country estate, Eliestoun, was built in 1889 and '90. Mrs. Starr died at the beginning of October 1891, and her husband, within the month, decided to move to Oregon, where his son had gone some years before.

The early nineties mark the passing of a number of Elsah's early citizens, including its first settler, Addison Greene, for whom the McNairs had worked on a number of occasions, and who died on February 2, 1892. William Onetto died on the 17th. McNair noted the next day, "the Odd Fellows buried him it was Very muddy Robt and I Sung worked on machine the ballance of the time." Richard Hansell died in September and Annie Hansell the next January; others followed.

March 17th brought a temperence lecture to Elsah. McNair notes, "Eugene and 30 others joined." There is never a mention in the diary of any of the McNairs drinking, so temperence was no problem for them. March also brought Eugene another sort of work. The diary notes for the 18th: "Eugene commenced work for the P, B, I, Co running the tramway Engine." This refers to the steam tramway of the Piasa Bluffs Improvement Company, which was developing the bluff top area between Elsah and Chautauqua, with a large Victorian hotel and rows of summer cottages. The tramway, the only one of its kind ever operated in the

St. Louis area, brought visitors and their goods up from the railroad stop at Grassy Hollow to the bluff top east of the hotel. The engine house and station stood on top, pulling the cars up by cable. Today the only reminders of this venture are a slight dent in the earth marking the roadbed, and the footings of the engine house on top.

But Eugene's work was very uneven. It was a characteristic of the time and place that work was conceived of by the day or job. A steady job, in the modern fashion, was unknown in Elsah. Eugene might fish one day, hunt the next, run the Ames's pumps the next, and work on extending their boathouse the next. He might help Tommy haul hay, spend a few days building his house, help his father with his invention, run the mill, or do nothing. The one fairly consistent thing was the fact of enterprise. Work was steady and usually hard. There was no lack of opportunity. Self-employment was easy. Work for others was also plentiful. Pay was never high, but then neither were necessities or amusements. Expectations were limited, and one's prospects depended completely on one's own efforts. Neighbors or the Odd Fellows were there to lend a hand in sickness or death. But the family unit supplied the real insurance against want, and the diary makes clear that in the McNairs' case, the family unit stuck together despite all kinds of strains and trials.

May of 1892 brought a flood. McNair notes on the 12th, "one of the bents of the Trestle floated away." That night came the heaviest storm of the year. The 13th saw the river "to top of iron one place on levee." On the 14th there was a foot of water over the railroad

rails, and it was still raining. A notation of the 15th reads, "the river lacks 5' 8" at noon of 58 high water and Still rising." The notation of the 17th is, "Rained last night the Mosouri River Broke through across at wanches Can hear it roaring . . . . River Still raising up behind the Shop." It probably got inside.[27] Evidently the water had backed up Askew Creek beyond Maple, making this one of Elsah's higher floods. But after a rise on the 18th, it fell five inches the next day and continued down slowly. Sunday, the 22nd, brought "about 150 Vehicles in town . . . to See the high water." But the threat to the McNair shop was over.[28]

There is an extraordinary notation in the diary at the height of the flood, May 18. William writes:

> Robt Studdied on flying machine River Still raising his is a rotary fan one & mine is a four winged one two wings going down while two are going up on opposite corners run by levers."

Though Otto Lilienthal and Octave Chanute had widely experimented with gliders before this date, it was still well before Samuel Langley's unsuccessful steam-powered flight of 1896, and before the earliest documented evidence, of 1899, that the Wright Brothers were interested in the subject. When they first demonstrated, in Kitty Hawk, in 1903, that powered heavier-than-air flying machines were possible, the McNairs were still tinkering with their own flying machines--as they continued to do for some time.

It is nonetheless interesting that these two mechanics in a small country town would have begun, without capital, without engineering

training, to plan a flying machine. Clearly flying was in the air. The McNairs kept up with current developments largely by Sunday reading, of which they did much. William subscribed to the Scientific American for a number of years, though he seldom reports anything he learned from it.

If two mechanically minded brothers from Elsah failed, and two from Dayton, Ohio, succeeded, this does not mean that the McNairs should not have tried. Ideas they developed in their corn planter and their adding machine eventually did find use, according to oral reports, in models manufactured by others. In a sense they represent the necessary failures which provide the bulk of inventive attempts. All invention does not bring success, and great inventions usually involve the collective interest in a subject of a variety of people, trained and untrained, working and testing, finally succeeding.

In launching into aeronautics, the McNairs, hindsight tells us, were out of their league. After a time flying machines became their third major inventive obsession. It was without question the one involving the most principles beyond the McNairs' training. One longtime Elsah citizen, August Jacobson (1889-1967), recalled to the writer the McNairs' attempt to fly their machine from the roof of their house. "They were nearly killed," he remarked.

But in 1892 work on the flying machine was clearly a project of the future. The more immediate concern was the adding machine. And even that was fitted in around the plethora of daily jobs and concerns--

hauling coal, sharpening sickles, helping with the boys' houses, judging elections, killing and cooking a chicken every Sunday, grinding grain and sawing lumber, helping Eugene with his bees, singing at funerals or for the Democrats, supporting Cleveland's election, mending the fence around the house, baking, and the like.

Even at this stage the McNairs had interested some local capital in their machine. Daniel J. Murphy and one of the Gibersons were actively inquiring about it. Clearly the McNairs valued their invention highly. On November 25, 1892, McNair wrote,

> Murphy was in to See us and wanted to know what interest we would give him if he would furnish Enough money to make a model and patent also what we would take for the machine we offered to double the amount that he would put in for model and patent and we ask $10,000 Cash Tommy commenced papering Eugene bought a Skiff from Ike Haupts gave $5^{00} for it.[29]

Spring of 1893 saw Robert working at gathering subscriptions for the adding machine with mixed success. Mrs. Lucy Ames, true to her keen business sense, did not subscribe. But she was also humanitarian enough to pay in advance for one of the yet-to-be-perfected machines later. Plainly she had no great faith in the project.

In late May Eugene and Lou Segraves, whose family's farm lay on the Elsah Road near the road to Chautauqua, bought furniture and housekeeping materials in Grafton, in preparation for their coming marriage. There is no record of the wedding in the diary. It occurred sometime before June 14th. On this date, William got a letter from his new daughter-in-law written to Peoria. Tommy apparently also married about this same time, but there is no record of this event either.

The brothers had gone to Peoria on June 4 in order to work on their machine in a better equipped shop than they had in Elsah. Since they worked for a time in a clock shop, it would seem that they were making gears. They also worked on key plungers, stems, key arm rests, and other machine parts. Work in northern Illinois continued until June 22, when they set out for Elsah on the late boat.

William moved in with Tommy and Nolia because it seemed more homey to him than lodging separately, paying board. This was not always easy, as his daughter-in-law occasionally resented him, but compromises on both sides made it work. The family house on Mill Street was rented out.

No immediate changes were brought about by the new marriages. The two newlywed men continued working by the day, helping at the "Camp meeting" when summer arrived and partying about with the younger set. Chautauqua was now a major and continuing summer event for the lives of Elsah people. In August, the famous evangelist, Sam Jones, visited and preached, and William shook his hand on the train back to Elsah.

Work on the adding machine was a nearly daily activity for some years. Progress was extremely slow, but there is no sign of discouragement in the record. Meanwhile, William got more deeply into politics, becoming a member of the county Democratic Central Committee in 1892. He is also much more active in church affairs. Henry S. Turner, who summered at his estate, Eliestoun, on the site of the old J. E. Starr fruit farm, also entered local Democratic politics.

Tommy added clerking at village elections and paperhanging to his hauling work. Nolia always helped him with the papering and occasionally

did the whole job. By June 1894 he sold his horses to James McDow. About this time William became a grandfather, Eugene and Lou having a daughter, Bessie.

By May, the brothers had their adding machine enough in shape so that they hired a draftsman, Thomas Flaherty, to draw it up in preparation for a patent application. They had a hard time keeping him at work. He either went fishing, went to a Catholic picnic, went hunting for Indian relics, or was drinking. But slowly he did complete the job, being paid $23 and leaving for St. Louis on the excursion boat on May 26th, 1894.

The May diary also records for the first time two purchases which are now familiar American cultural facts: Baloney and gasoline.

July saw William's mother, Elizabeth,have a light stroke. He thought she would die, and sent for Maria, but she was to live on for some time thereafter.

The rest of 1894 saw few changes, but the brothers attracted much interest with their machine and potential capital that eventually was not forthcoming because the perfecting of the machine took so much time.

William much enjoyed playing with his granddaughter. This eventually was to bring the protest from her parents that he was spoiling her, and he tried to desist, but she was plainly a great pleasure to him. In hindsight it is ironic that William McNair strove into old age to perfect an invention that would bring wealth to his family and did not seem to value the solid and reliable family relationship

he gave them. Evidence from the Milford letters to Nolia shows that Tommy married into a close, decent, and loving family whose sympathy and backing could be relied upon. Divorce and family strife were common in theElsah area at the time, and instruction in sound family attitudes was a gift that can not be minimized.

The final diary begins with June 1896, just a week after the birth of Tommy's daughter Beulah, who arrived on the scene May 24th.[30]

At this time too, Eugene's second child, Willis, is on the scene. Work is still proceeding in the same fashion on the adding machine. The McNair boys are still working around at different jobs, running the steam tramway or helping at the Chautauqua grounds in season, helping thresh Seagraves' wheat, working on the roads, cutting corn fodder, fishing, hunting, nutting, caring for their cattle, occasionally going to Jerseyville or Alton to work. Tommy made flour bins for a time, but they did not sell well.

The arrival of bicycles in the Elsah area is first discussed in the 1896 diary. William McNair occasionally fixed one for someone. Tommy got one, riding it all the way to St. Louis on November 13th. Robert suggested adding a strap to the pedals to hold the foot in place, but they never did anything with that. Eventually, Tommy was to put together a bike for Nolia, and they took rides together with Beulah as a toddler riding on the handlebars.

The arrival of Christmastime saw Tommy turn out a cedar cup on the lathe for Fletch Milford, his father-in-law. Mr. Milford was a Civil War veteran who was by trade a steam-shovel operator. Work

called him away from home for long periods. Work as close as Edwardsville meant boarding away from home. And his work was also sporadic. After the turn of the century he took whatever work he could get during slack times, working in the Elsah quarry at times though he was an older man. Mrs. Milford also worked at home as a seamstress. The other Milford girls, Nannie, Grace, and Rosa, who married a Dr. Watson, of Alton, were clothes-conscious and always well-dressed.

Robert became a local magistrate at this time and divided his time between work on the adding machine and handling local legal problems. He seemed to be able to fine people and still remain friends all right. William complains in the diary that Robert doesn't share the money he makes as magistrate, remarks which indicate that the brothers had an equal sharing arrangement that cut across their many activities.

Some unusual cases arose. For example, on February 12, 1897, "Preacher Weber was prosecuted by Maud waterman for Sleeping with her," as the diary notes it. The next day the minister took a request for a change of venue to Robert, who allowed a continuance until the next Wednesday. But on Tuesday, Maud Waterman dismissed her suit. What this means is rather mysterious, but McNair notes hearing Weber preach subsequently, and so whatever happened was not held against him.

William was elected a village trustee on April 20, 1897. During this spring Charles Nugent, of the St. Louis dry goods family, had bought the Piasa Bluffs Hotel and was providing work for Elsah men in fixing it up to reopen.

In a curious diary entry of May 16th, McNair notes:

Clear nice morning A Very nice day Lou & Eugene were out at Seagraves I done nothing but invent a folding Basket--Newgent Brought a big Crowd up from St Louis.

The folding basket to which he so nonchalantly refers turned out to be a significant and patentable invention, and the only one of the McNairs' many devices of which Elsah still has an example.[31] The next day he noted, "Robt made an improvement on my folding basket and is Very Sanguin about it." Soon they made a model, finishing it on the 19th. As McNair remarked, "it is nice."

In a letter written from Peoria in 1913, McNair described his basket, which the brothers had been manufacturing, as follows: "A Folding Market basket, and under the same Patent, A Lunch Basket, and Canteen, that when they are empty the Basket can be shoved into the canteen and put into the pocket and when both are full, the canteen acts as the cover for the Basket." The market variety was made of thin wood with tin hinges at the folds, while the lunch basket was tin throughout. It is a practical and ingenious device with a central handle. In folding it, one lifts the bottoms of the two ends to the handle, then folds the sides in. They collapse to form a compact unit at the handle.

But the inventive spirit had only just been touched off. The next week saw William devise a folding chair that made a roll when collapsed, and "also a new Style of Converting water into Steam for Engines by heating a large heavy plate enclosed and impinging water on it at evry Stroke." Neither idea was ever developed, nor was a folding umbrella,

which William proposed to Robert on June 3rd. July saw William planning a new style of stove pipe connection. This, too, was dropped. The July 22, 1897 entry reads in part, "I thought of a rotary fan or other fan to be operated by the foot and Connected above the head Robt asked to go in with me and develope it and I told him all right we planned on it and the umbrella." But with the advent of electricity, nobody wanted to activate a fan with his foot either. This idea was also let go. However it was plain that the passion to invent was now uppermost in the brothers' minds.

Eugene and Lou had moved to Alton, visiting only on occasion. Eugene sold his Elsah house to Mike Huss for $200 in March 1898. With Tommy well set up, William felt more independent on the one hand, and on the other felt very strongly that he would like to leave money to his sons. Both feelings shifted his attention toward inventing.

Nonetheless, the brothers still did tinkering work, saw sharpening, and odd jobs to keep daily money coming in. The great shift is away from extensive canning, livestock raising, chicken keeping, and the like. William often eats at the homes of one or the other of his boys, donating money and work in return.

Finally, after many delays, the brothers got a patent on their folding basket. It was filed on February 23, 1897. McNair notes its number was 671,270. They had been planning to manufacture it, and had had several offers from others to take up the basket and make it for royalty. Eventually the brothers were apparently to make the basket themselves, but not to the exclusion of other activities. One speculates that the basket itself would not alter their fortunes in a

major way, and they continued work on more pretentious inventions.

Willis Brock and his family left Elsah for Seattle on March 10, 1898. This marked the departure from Elsah of McNair's nephew and the last of one of Elsah's oldest families. The firm of Brock and Onetto, commission merchants, had bought the first lots sold after Elsah was founded by General Semple in 1853. Willis' family had lived in the stone house on LaSalle Street now known as the Brock-Belote house, and the family had been prominent in every aspect of the village life.

Apparently the interest of Elsah people in the Northwest had something to do with Eugene Semple, one of Seattle's most prominent citizens. His father General Semple, who founded Elsah, had been one of the first to call for the occupation of the Oregon territory by the United States, the area being shared jointly by the U. S. and Canada.[31] Eugene was the next to last territorial governor.[32] The number of Elsah people, including, shortly, Eugene and Tommy McNair and their families, that would go to Oregon seems extraordinary.[33] McNair notes in his diary occasional correspondence with Semple, and visits to the brothers when Semple was back in Elsah were not unusual. Edgar Ames, the son of Lucy V. Semple Ames, and Eugene Semple's nephew, had also settled in Oregon. The end sheet in the last McNair diary we know (ending April 9, 1898) gives his address and identifies him as General Manager of the Canal Navigation Company in Seattle.[34]

It is very likely that William McNair continued to keep diaries, but he was soon to leave Elsah for Peoria, and when his granddaughter,

son Willis, is now a wage earner, away for a month harvesting and threshing. Eugene is in debt $200. He is afraid that he may have to give up his homestead to pay the debt. He has plenty of work but expenses are high. In addition to Willis, he has three other children, Clyde, Ralph, and Fay. Apparently, another, Ted, has died. The corn crop was good that year, but the wheat did little.

He too would like to return to Illinois. In early October he wrote again remembering the good times he had fishing and hunting while a young man in Elsah. He has just cut off the end of his right thumb almost back to the bone while rip sawing a springy board. He is trying to keep working, but the thumb is sensitive.

The next month finds Lou writing, "oh I wished time and again we had never come West." Willis is working. He has a horse he has broken. He expects to return to school in January. Lou is raising a large flock of chickens.

Early the next year, though they still wish they could return, they have come to grips with the reality of their situation. Willis will be making $35 a month plus board next summer in the harvest. Willis Brock and Eugene think they will do better by staying in Oregon now. The carfare back would be the savings of many months, and would go a long way to paying for a house. Lou has thought of coming for the summer with the three small children, but the expense would be so great, and Eugene worked so hard for what they have, that she knew it would not be fair. They have now decided to keep the homestead long enough to gain title, then try to sell it out for $2000 or more. What the upshot

of this was is now lost to us. Assumedly they stayed. They did not return to Elsah, and the family today lives in the West, primarily in California.

While Eugene was not much of a correspondent, Tommy and Nolia write faithfully back to the Milfords in Elsah, as well as writing to William McNair in Peoria, when they were in the West. Though the elder McNairs wrote of returning to Elsah, more often as the years passed, they were really permanently settled in Peoria, living in the Sehmer brewery building at the foot of Pleasant or Dutch Hill. They lived hand-to-mouth, depending on small jobs, the charity of friends and neighbors, and the capital that Robert was able to scrape together for their inventions.

Buainess occasionally brought one or the other back to Elsah. In February 1906, Robert came down to sell the lot their shop stood on to Abner Worthey for $75, plus board and carfare. He moved some of the things out of the shop, but he had to leave other things because they were frozen in the mud left there by the last year's flood. October brought William to Elsah to shingle the roof of the McNair brick house.

Robert retained title to the small rock house for some time, but he borrowed on it from the Elsah school board, at their standard ten percent interest, and he also neglected the structure. In January 1908, for example, after Tommy and Nolia had returned to Elsah, Robert solicited their help in putting the house in shape to rent. Later that year he offered to deed the house to Tommy if Tommy would agree to

let him redeem it by paying the interest Tommy would have to pay the school trustees. Robert intended to return to Elsah and live in it if they made any money on their inventions. Tommy declined this offer. In 1909 William had visited Elsah and found Robert's woodshed full of termites. A letter from Robert asked Tommy to fix it. Plainly the younger man took little interest in the house. His uncle was slowly relinquishing his hold on the house because of his other interests.

The correspondence from the Milfords to Tommy and Nolia in Oregon is both rich and charming, as well as a prime source of Elsah news and gossip. It is full of remarks about estrangements, romances, manslaughter, illness, economic conditions, elopements, divorces, and the canning of fruits and berries. How the hens are laying, how much milk the cow is giving, and how the pasture fence is holding up are all subjects of interest.[35]

One enthusiastic fad of the time was collecting leather postcards to sew into sofa cushions, and the Milford girls encouraged the exchange of cards with anybody on the west coast for that purpose, tapping all the McNairs' new Oregon friends for them.

In 1906 telephones were a new thing in Elsah. They were battery operated, always involved party lines, and frequently went out of order. People didn't seem to know how to use them effectively, and in warm weather would walk over to someone's house rather than calling them up. Thunderstorms would bring the wires down, and if the repairman was busy, he would ignore them for weeks. Nan Milford suspected one family of taking a part of the downed wire to use as a clothesline.

People also tried to fix their own phones, with very varied success, sometimes putting the whole party out of order. One amateur electrician fixed the phone so he had to speak into the receiver. Young letter writers now often ended their missives by writing, "Well, I will ring off now." The phones were not properly grounded either, and tended to attract lightning. A letter of April 17, 1907 includes the comment, "Everybody is getting crazy for the phone to be fixed Willie is talking of fixing them."[36]

During the years of the Milford letters, 1906 and 1907, most Elsah men were working at the Western Whiting Mill opened on the riverfront in 1902. In October 1906, Charles Doron, owner of the riverfront flour mill built by the McNairs in 1856, sued the Whiting factory for damages of $5,000. He lost. The upshot of it was that the whiting manufacturers bought the mill for $4,000 through an agent and, in 1907, attached it to their own buildings, installing a rock crusher. The Milfords tried to use the promise of work on this project to lure Tommy and his family home, but he stayed on in Oregon until May of 1907.

To the Milfords, Oregon was the ragged end of nowhere. There was no school for Beulah to attend, so Nolia had to teach her at home. Sumpter was high in the mountains. Winter brought about five feet of snow, which didn't melt until May. A friend of Tommy's later wrote from Sumpter that he had to put snow water in his tub and let it melt so he could bathe. In contrast, the winter of 1906-1907 was a warm one in Elsah, with everyone worrying how they would get enough ice off the

ponds. The usual early January cold snap had failed them, and they had to wait for February cold to get ice. Even then it wasn't enough.

The pleas of Magnolia's sisters, Nan and Grace, for her to return were expressions of affection, but they must have been a burden to the Oregon couple, because getting together the funds for carfare was no easy task. A train ticket to Oregon in 1909 cost $44. When Tommy did return, in late April or early May of 1907, he left his household furnishings in Sumpter, to be sold by a friend, Bob Graves.[37]

What brought Tommy home was perhaps the damage to the McNair brick house, which the Milfords were looking after. They found in early spring that the first floor (in what is now the dining room) had fallen into the basement, which was in places knee deep in water. Tommy had to fill the basement, shore up the first floor, and lay a new one. A well lies under the house, and he had to supply it with a new cap. At this time he also changed the roof pattern and lowered some windows. Formerly the brick walls had gone up above the roof, in a pattern often seen in Pennsylvania houses. Now the roof was brought out over the walls. Apparently the roof had always been difficult to keep tight before. In making this change, Tommy had to eliminate some chimneys, which were built into the walls. These were simply knocked down to the level of the new roof and replaced with new ones. This work took Tommy until November.

At this time Tommy and his family were hearing from his father in Peoria that they had improved the cornplanter--the same one they began in 1879--and were hoping to market it. Again the hope proved vain.

Apparently it was a good machine by this time. McNair claimed that it would "plant 4 rows as Easy with one horse as the other kind plants 2 rows with 2 horses and with no ropes or wire and it will plant it all the Same depth on a loamy ridge or in a dead furrow." It seems, though, that they could not attract capital. In fact the pattern over nearly thirty years was to be repeated and repeated. Someone would offer capital. Negotiations would follow. Then the money would never come through. One of the apparent reasons for this was that the McNairs expected too much for their inventions, even when they had not yet perfected them. When finally they began coming down in their expectations, and that selectively, it was too late.

September 18, 1907 brought a letter from William which read:

> . . . Robt says he is going to Start out this week and See what he can do toward getting Some funds to Secure our Corn Planter and he hardly ever fails when he Sets his head to do a thing, of that Kind= You ought to see our Small model it is a <u>daisy</u> plants Pop Corn, it is that largest check rower Model made into a corn planter with considerable improvements over our old cornplanter--and we can pick it up and take it with us to Show how it works and it is ready now, So we will "<u>try try again</u>"

October found them still trying. They took their model to the Avery Cornplanter Works in Peoria. One administrator told them it was the best model he had ever seen, so one letter says, but also said that they had their year's production all planned out, and the men hired, so

he would not retool and take it on. The next month saw them wanting $20,000 before handing over control of the planter to anyone.

As time went on, they became more enamored of other projects, especially of their flying machine. In October 1911, there was to be a fair at Peoria with an exhibition of flying machines. Wright and Curtis were to send models. The McNairs wanted theirs to be ready too. In October 1909, Robert had taken a model, one-twelfth size, to Chicago to show to the famous pioneer aviator, Octave Chanute. William reported the encounter in an extraordinary letter of October 11, 1909:

> Robt did not make a Success with Chanute as he was a Stuck up Blockhead but Evry other Person that seen the flying machine thinks it is fine but Chanute wants us to test it with a one horse Power Dynamo and run it up to 1440 revolutions and it only a little thing 1/12 the Size only intended to Show the principle but he wants it Tested before he will give his opinion of it . . . .[38]

A letter of May 5, 1910 finds the brothers in hopes of buying a satisfactory gasoline engine to power the flying machine. This letter also contains one of the ubiquitous promises of financial aid: ". . . if we make a Success of flying if it is only for 1/2 mile Brown Says he will Put in $10,000 in 10 minutes for he'll know it can be made all right." Also present in the letter is one of the rare diagrams in which McNair describes one of his devices. It is the wing of the airplane. It was to work with two pairs of wings moving up and down. The wings were to work in opposition. On the upstroke, vanes in the

wings were to turn edgewise, like an opened venetian blind. On the downstroke, they were to shut.

What the McNairs had in mind was producing a machine which would lift vertically. They eventually had hopes of selling it to the United States Navy. In November 1910, a civilian pilot, Eugene Ely, flew off a platform on the cruiser BIRMINGHAM. The same pilot landed on a platform on the cruiser PENNSYLVANIA, then took off again, on January 18, 1911. Clearly naval aviation was in the wind. But one can understand Chanute's skepticism concerning the engineering principles of the McNair device.

It is interesting that in 1894 each brother had a different plan, both for vertical lift-off. William's was as described. Robert's was for a rotating wing. It was their habit to work on competing models, then choose one. It this case, they clearly chose the wrong one.

On the eve of the flying show in Peoria, October 8, 1911, some men were trying to get a glider to work on a field near the McNairs' shop. After a number of trials and failures, they gave up. The McNairs had given up earlier, for the time. They decided to show their corn-planter at the fair instead. They couldn't get a model working really properly by fair time, but nonetheless, they seem to have picked up some capital at this time, getting Tommy to come to Peoria late in the year to fix over a garage for the manufacture of the planters. For someunknown reason, they gave this up too. Early 1912 saw William with a new scheme. The winters were too much for them. Robert, who was eighty, had had pneumonia. He thought he would try to rig up a

shop on a catamaran, then take their whole setup down to Little Rock, Arkansas, to work on the flying machine. The last letter, of February 11, 1912, had William writing to his son that he hoped to get $100,000 for the flying machine. Someone refered to as Lafferty thought he could get it for them. What the upshot of that was, one can only guess.

But these inventions were not the only ones the brothers developed during their Peoria period. In fact, they probably put more effort into their adding machine than into anything else. In 1907 they began writing letters on a letterhead containing an engraving of their adding machine, and the heading, "Office of McNair Brothers, Inventers of Adding Machines," They also printed a brochure, the front leaf of which read, "A FORTUNE/ knocks Once at / Every Man's Door / Don't Let it Pass by Unheeded / STOP / and Investigate This, the Latest and Best Improved." Opening the leaflet, one came on the words "ADDING MACHINE," with the engraving below it. It described the device and announced that it was protected by "an allowed United States patent application." This was handled by the Washington, D. C., patent attorneys, H. B. Willson & Company.

The pictured machine had eighty-one keys, nine each of every number from one through nine. It produced a taped column of figures and was capable of making sub-totals. It was operated by pulling a hand crank on the right side of the machine. In a letter of 1912, William McNair claimed that it had only one-ninth the moving parts of the Burroughs adding machine.

A patent on the adding machine finally arrived early in March 1908. This brought many solicitations from patent salesmen, and a visit from a Burroughs agent.

The brothers tried soon to sell out the adding machine, but nothing came through. By the year's end they were working on a smaller and cheaper model. Early in 1909 they came near to closing a deal on the machine, giving them $2500 and a $10 royalty on each machine. But this too came to naught. Soon after, they turned their attention to other projects. The last piece of correspondence known from the brothers, simply dated 1913, and written from Peoria, describes the adding machine among the inventions they are offering. All the others are there.

These were the major inventions, but not the only ones. In 1907 they had stirred some interest in their folding basket. In October of 1909 they thought they had a buyer for the basket patent at $1500 cash. Neither came to anything.

December 1908 brought a new idea from Robert--an ear pump to improve hearing. It was to be a suction pump run by a clock spring. They had a promise of purchase for a hundred of them if it could be perfected and produced. October 1909 saw them trying to simplify the ear pump, and in November William wanted Tom to come to Peoria to help manufacture them. This invention also was never perfected.

Some thought was also given to a self-winding clothesline and steel grain door for railroad cars, though little significant progress was made with these ventures.[39] As far as one can tell, the McNairs never realized a return on any of their inventions. When Robert died, in 1914, the

obituary still said the flying machine was nearly perfected.

There is a significance to this beyond the fact that the elderly millwrights had no capital and little skill in handling the intricacies of the politics of capital. The period of their early manhood in Elsah was one of comparative comfort. The country life did not afford wealth, but food was plentiful, life was richly varied, and livelihood was cheap. But it was also hard work. Effort did not enable one to rise out of the station of common man easily. Chronic concern with nickels and dimes was not only characteristic of the McNairs, but of the whole society. This is widely recorded not only in Elsah materials, but in the vast literature of the American small town.

Yet this was the age Mark Twain called "Gilded." It seemed blooming with possibilities for wealth. The dreams which expended themselves in Elsah were many. The flour mill, under its successive owners; the distillery, burned in 1871; the papermill, built and burned in 1868; the Piasa Bluffs Hotel, opened in 1891 and again in 1897, with its steam tramway and many summer cottages, most of which burned in the fall of 1914; the shoo-fly line, with its incipient tunnel, built in 1881; even the Western Whiting and Manufacturing Company, which closed in 1928—all eventually failed, some with barely a start. There seemed to be a good deal of Mark Twain's Colonel Sellers, the great speculator, in everyone.

When life stretched out before one with a great sameness, endless work just to tread water economically, the temptation to try something different was great. The efforts that the McNairs made, though they didn't come to financial success, were valiant, and gave their

lives a color and interest that are still remembered over seventy years after they left Elsah.

They also left solid accomplishments as well. The mill was taken down. The distillery burned. But their house is still present. The Methodist Church they built still graces the community. Other structures, their part in which has been forgotten, were undoubtedly built and still remain. And for the historian, William McNair's daily notes on the life and times have left a record of a lively mind and careful observer of the passing scene, as well as the best history of a whole side of Elsah, the daily activities of the common man, extant.

It would seem that education, and economic methods, had advanced beyond the methods of the McNair brothers by the time of their old age. But they were a part of the groundswell of American desire for progress that brought about this advance. As such one cannot but admire them. And for affording the twentieth century the best look we have into the daily life of a Mississippi River village of the late nineteenth century, we cannot but be grateful for the doggedness with which William McNair recorded his life as well as the depth of family affection, which the Milfords shared, that promoted so much correspondence, and advanced the fortunate accident of its preservation for modern perusal.

ENDNOTES:

[1]Stone from the mills is currently part of the foundation and retaining wall of First Church of Christ, Scientist, Elsah, at LaSalle and Valley Streets.

[2]Information on Thomas McNair comes from an unidentified newspaper obituary clipped by the family and donated to the author by Beulah McNair Carpenter.

[3]The C. R. Arnold map of Elsah of 1862 lists both William and his father as millwrights.

[4]The Hosmer house lot was owned by William as early as 1859. However, the tax assessment of 1899 lists lots 11 and 12 of block 13 under R. H. McNair and only lot 10 under William.

[5]Several extant letters from Miss Stroud show the friendly and informal relationship maintained between renter and tenant. These are part of the collection now housed in the Principia College Library. A stone foundation up in the valley is perhaps all that remains of the McNairs' cattle raising activities.

[6]The best surmise seems to be that the McNairs bought a standard set of plans and adapted it for use on Selma Square in Elsah. One Grant Wood painting shows a woman in front of a church of apparently identical design.

[7]Seven volumes of William McNair's diaries are housed in the Principia College Library rare book collection. Since all diary quotations came from these volumes, they are not individually footnoted. "Lib" in this entry refers to Elizabeth, William's wife.

[8]James Piggott was a member of the well-known Piggott family which figures largely in the early history of St. Clair County, and which first settled what is now Elsah Township when, in 1828, Isaac Newton Piggott founded the

post office at Eminence, on a portion of what is now the Principia College campus. At the time, the post office, and the whole area, was in Greene County. On the Piggotts of St. Clair County see Carl Baldwin's fascinating Echoes of Their Voices. St. Louis: Hawthorn Publishing Company, 1978. On Eminence see Elsah History, number 15 (April 1976), as well as numbers 20 and 21 (August 1977). Brock and Onetto were both well-known Elsah family names. As a partnership, they owned the first commission merchant business in Elsah, purchasing the first lot sold after the founding of the village.

[9]The Wards were another old Elsah family. Clement J. Ward owned the house on Mill Street currently owned by the Robert Rockabrand family. In 1868 he ran a cider mill on the present LaSalle Street site of the Christian Science church.

[10]On Addison Greene, who with his wife Amanda was the first settler of the Elsah valley, see Elsah History, number 12 (March 1975). This colorful family left the Mormon community in Nauvoo, Illinois, shortly before Greene's uncle, Brigham Young, led the Mormons to Utah.

[11]That is, the attractions of Elsah seemed to exert a perennial pull on many people. In Quincy, McNair was a mere wage earner. In Elsah he was a citizen of a village with an endless number of diversions and amusements, as the diaries make clear.

[12]Mrs. Lucy V. Semple Ames, daughter of Elsah's founder, bought a hundred shares of stock in the railroad, on the stipulation that it would be completed to Elsah by January 1, 1882. It was not really completed, despite the noisy locomotive, so she would not pay. She was sued by the railroad, but she won.

[13]The McNairs' use of the two houses, and of a shed at one time built between them, connecting them, varied greatly. Around the turn of the century the brothers used the rock house as a machine shop.

[14]Brock and Onetto began the building in 1858. The Odd Fellows bought the structure in 1871, renting space in it to a variety of enterprises. Extensive changes were made in the structure in 1886. After the coming of the railroad, it became the local depot. After falling into decay, it was finally razed in 1951.

[15]Tubal Brock, Martha's husband, father of Willis, who figures extensively in the text below. Tubal was an old family name.

[16]Martha Brock is buried in the Elsah cemetery. Her dates are February 8, 1834 to April 12, 1882.

[17]By law every able bodied male citizen had to spend some time each year working on the roads. The revised Ordinances of the Village of Elsah for 1891, Chapter XIII, read (Section 1), "That every able bodied male inhabitant of the village of Elsah above the age of twenty-one years, and under the age of fifty years, residing within this village on and after the first Monday in April of each year, excepting all village officials paupers, id[i]ots, lunatics, and such others as are exempt by law, shall be required to perform on the streets and alleys of said village two days labor each year, which may be commuted by such person paying seventy-five cents per day to the street commissioner." Refusal brought a three-dollar fine. Listing the village officials with the idiots and lunatics is worthy of Mark Twain.

[18]Jugging was a favorite method of catching fish. It involved attaching baited lines to a number of sealed jugs used as floats, with an anchor line attached, and throwing them out of a boat, then checking each line periodically.

[19]"Ner" is Abner Hartley, a longtime Elsah resident.

[20]Piasa Island lies opposite the mouth of Piasa Creek on the east end

of Elsah Township.

[21]Almost surely there was a diary. William had by that time become too faithful a recorder of the day's transactions to let it lapse, then pick it up so regularly.

[22]The McNair Brothers were well-known local singers and were in demand.

[23]See the Historic Elsah Foundation pamphlet, Chautauqua, Illinois, a Brief History, by William Fabian.

[24]One of the oddities of Elsah history is that G. Eldridge Hamlin, who as a chairman of the Board of Trustees of Principia lived many years on the college campus in Elsah, was the grandson of the manufacturer of Wizard Oil, which McNair so frequently used.

[25]On the Xavier Schneider attempted murder case see Elsah History, number 8 (March 1974), which devotes seven pages to the "Case of the Clobbered Cooper," by Leslie Yelland. Page 3 of this issue includes a picture of Willis Brock and his wife and children.

[26]The shoo-fly line refused to dump coal for the McNairs behind their mill, though the train went right by.

[27]As the flood of 1973 showed, the site of the McNair lot, on the northeast corner of Mill and Maple Streets, is one of the lowest lots in the village, being lower than Riverview House. Hence it is easily flooded. On this flood see Elsah History, number 5 (Winter 1972-73).

[28]As in this flood, in 1973 so many visitors came to Elsah to see the flood that the residents finally had to barricade the upper access road and allow only those who had business to enter the village, such was the traffic jam.

[29]Ike Haupt was a longtime and beloved resident of Elsah. At times he kept a fish market, catching many of his own fish in the river. The late Byron Brock recalled to Charles Hosmer that when he ran a butcher shop in the village, in a building now removed, he wrote his account

records on the walls.

[30]Beulah McNair Carpenter, late of Hemet, California, passed away in 1975. A short article on her, including a photograph of her as a child in Elsah in the early 1890's, and another of her in California in the early 1970's, appears in Elsah History, numbers 13 and 14 (December 1975).

[31]See "An Elsah Patent," Elsah History, number 27 (April 1979). The only known example of the McNair basket is on display in the Village of Elsah Museum.

[32]See Frederick Merk, The Oregon Question: Essays in Anglo-American Diplomacy and Politics (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1967), p. 332. See also Mary Semple Ames Cushman's article, "General James Semple," Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society, For the Year 1905, Publication No. 10 (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Journal Company, 1906], pp. 69-70.

[33]A recent book on Eugene Semple is Alan Hynding's The Public Life of Eugene Semple: Promoter and Politician of the Pacific Northwest (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973). This text draws heavily on the extensive collection of Semple's papers at the university. Oddly enough a large amount of Elsah related material is included in the collection.

[34]Edgar Ames went on to make a considerable fortune building ships for the United States Navy in World War One.

[35]A reading of the letters of an average Elsah citizen soon convinces one that they decidedly did not live off the fat of the land. A couple of extra eggs or a fresh cow was a source of both delight and relief, affording extra pennies. The average citizen seemed entrapped in a round of constant work and little chance of breaking free of very moderate financial rewards.

[36]This probably refers to William Tonkinson, an Elsah blacksmith and later mayor, who lived for a long time on the southeast corner of Mill and Maple Streets in a house no longer there. His blacksmith shop, also gone, stood on Mill Street south of the house.

[37]Graves was shortly afterwards killed in an accident at the mine, causing the younger McNairs much shock.

[38]This remarkable exchange not only points out the difference between the techniques of the McNairs and of the hard-headed Chanute, but also is the only record I have seen of William calling anyone anything so serious as a blockhead. Plainly he was aroused and frustrated.

[39]The McNairs held patents on their clothes reel and perhaps on a grain door. The following patents are included in the McNairs' inventive efforts:

1. Improvement in Check-Rowers, Patent No. 220,403, October 7, 1879.

2. Improvement in Cog-Gearing, Patent No. 232,612, September 28, 1880. The object of this invention is "to provide cog-wheels that will clear themselves or each other from [dust] or . . . obstructions, thereby doing away with the necessity of . . . covering or casing in most cases." This patent was held by Robert alone.

3. "Device for Removably Attaching Pulleys to Different-Sized Shafts," Patent No. 362,767, May 10, 1887, held by William alone. This patent claimed "the combination, with a wheel or pulley, of a ring having cam-grooves and cams adapted to be secure to the hub and to be operated by the cam-grooves to secure the wheel or pulley to different sized shafts, substantially as described." The McNairs' millwright's work would have made this a natural invention.

4. Folding Basket, Patent No. 613,387, November 1, 1898.

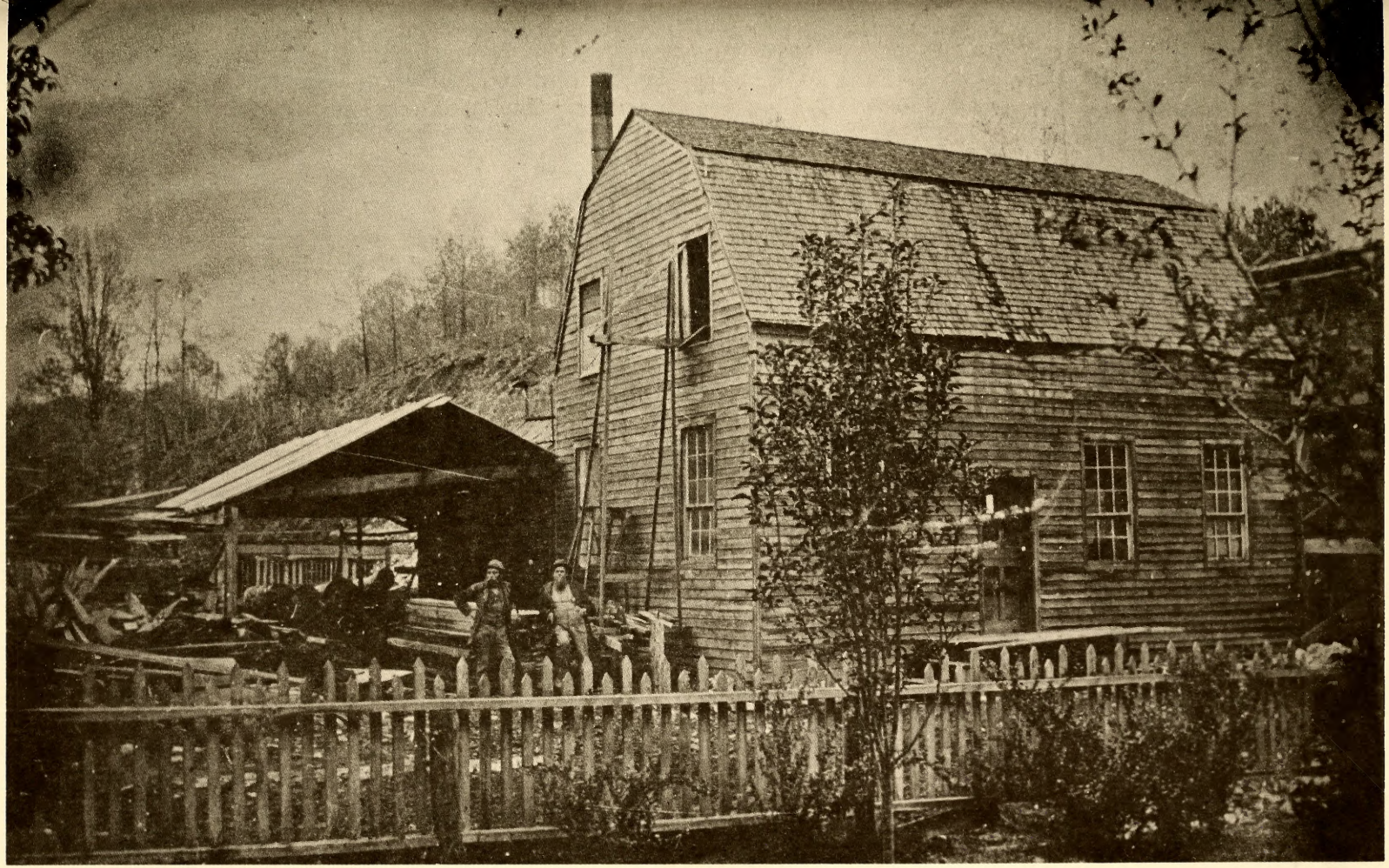
5. Thill Coupling. Patent No. 629,013, July 18, 1899, a "coupling for thills and poles." A thill is one of the shafts to which a horse is hitched

when pulling a vehicle.

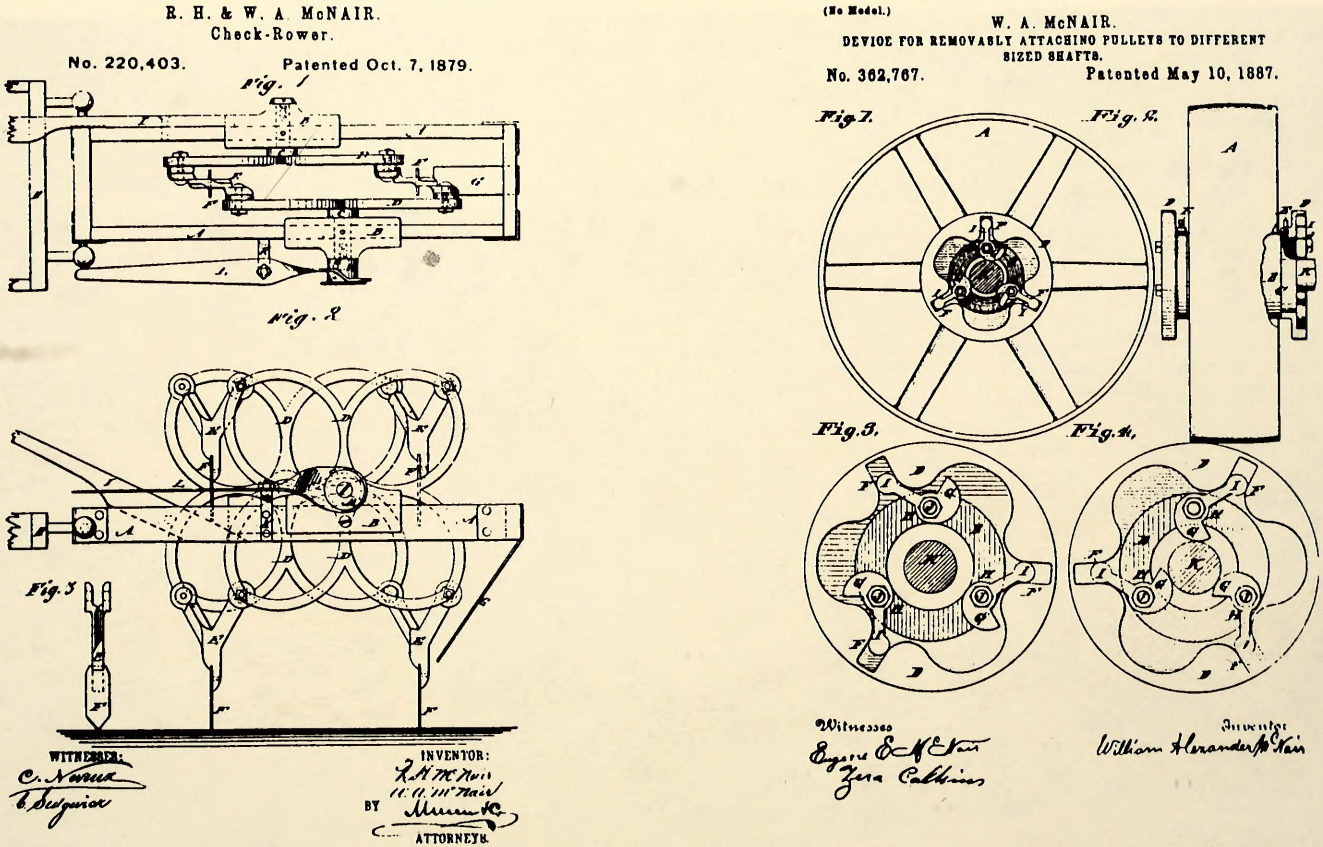
6. "Adding-Machine," Patent No. 880,030, February 25, 1908. This is by far the most extensive and ambitious patent. The description contains seventeen pages of text and twelve pages of diagrams.

7. "Clothes-Line Reel," Patent No. 1,017,010, February 13, 1912. This invention had "for its object to produce a device of this kind which will be very compact, and simple and can be readily used by anyone and will automatically rewind the clothes line after use and safely keep the same from dampness and moisture."

I am endebted to my brother, David N. Williams, for researching these patents in the United States Patent Office. He found no record of a grain-door patent.

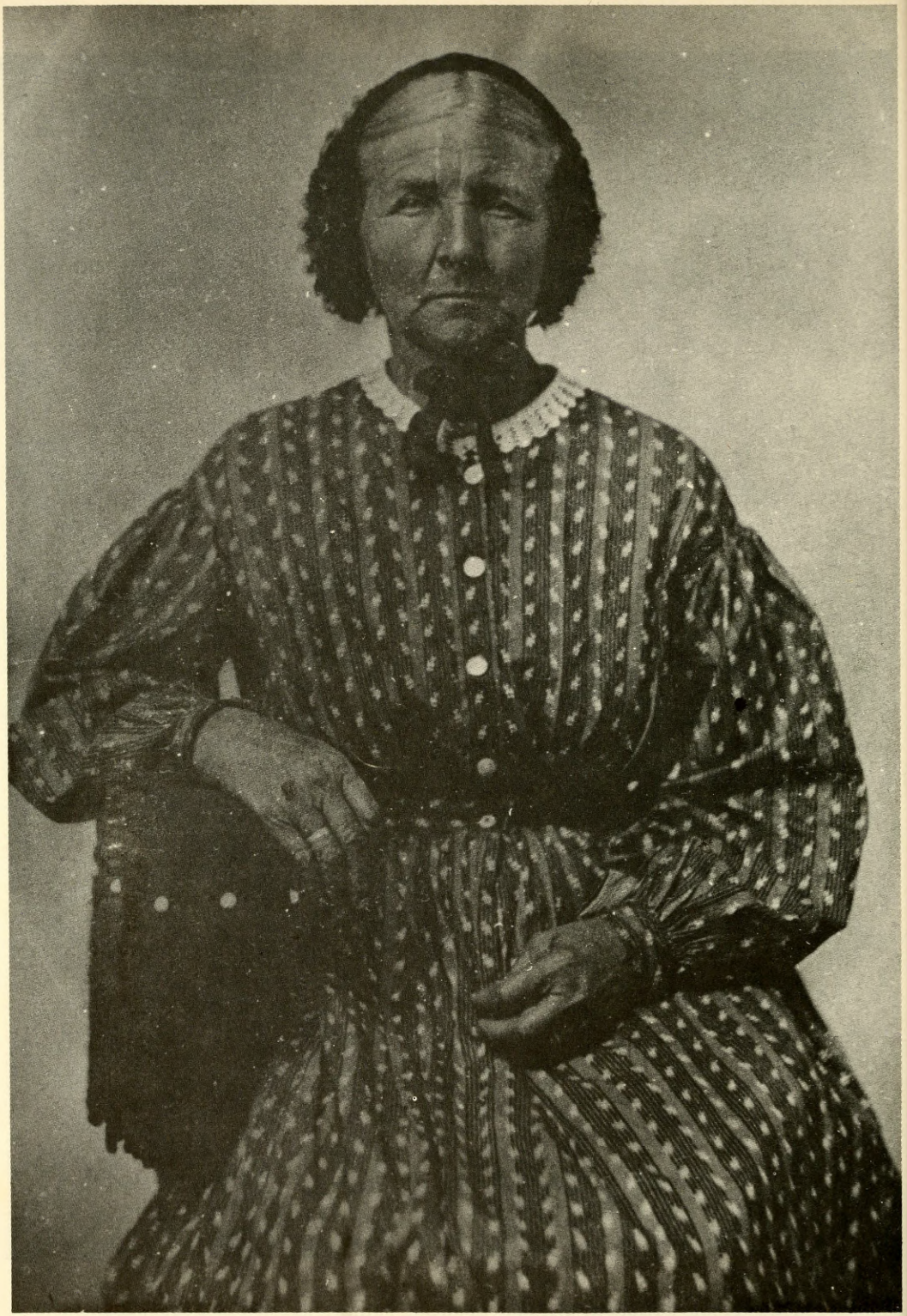


Robert and William McNair at their sawmill on the corner of Mill and Maple Streets, Elsah. **Source:** Beulah Carpenter.

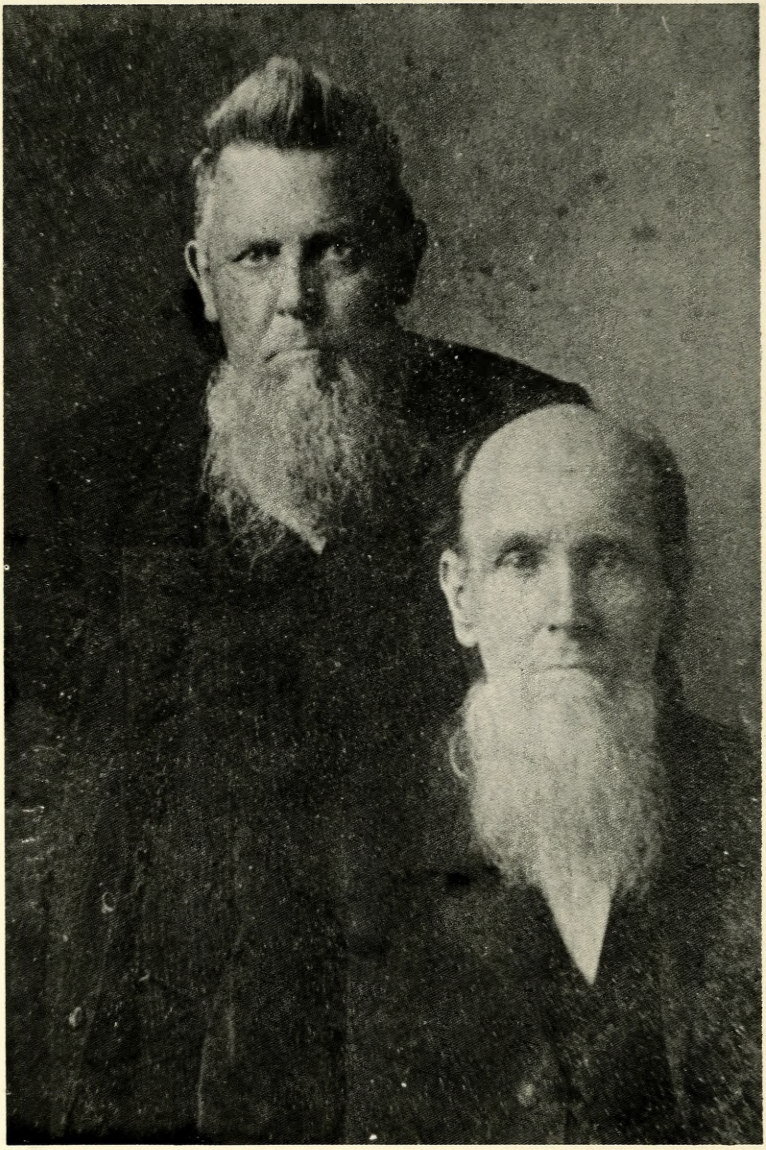


Diagrams from two McNair patent applications. On the left, the check-rower, a part of the McNair corn planter, which the brothers worked on intermittently for at least two decades. The other, an invention by William alone, is a device for attaching pulleys to different sized shafts. The application was witnessed by William's son, Eugene, and his neighbor, Zera Calkins. Found by David N. Williams in the U.S. Patent Office records.

Thomas and Elizabeth McNair, of Elsah, Illinois, parents of Robert and William McNair. **Source:** Beulah Carpenter.



Elizabeth McNair, mother of Robert and William, probably during her widowhood. **Source:** Beulah Carpenter.



William and Robert McNair, of Elsah, Illinois, ca. 1880.